

Developing a Business Communication Master's Degree: Fulfilling the Specific Needs of the Industry

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INTRODUCTION

University teaching authorities should pay attention to the basic necessities of the community where the institution is located. In our case, Universitat Jaume I is the academic reference of the province of Castellón, in the Eastern coast of Spain, a beautiful tourist area which is widely known by its industrial development since the 1970s. Despite its agricultural origins, most companies in the area deal with the tile manufacturing industry. In fact, 90% of the tiles created in Spain come from this province. Thus, we are talking about an industry offering thousands of jobs a year. Among those vacancies offered, many entrepreneurs are asking for well-prepared salesmen, ready to face the challenge of trading products in an international market. Thus, tile-related companies are looking for white-collar professionals, willing and able to take part in this industry.

Data from 2003 revealed that more than 50% of the total production of tiles and kitchen and bathroom decoration elements created in the Castellón area are directly sold abroad, throughout well-designed networks of subsidiaries and affiliates. The following years have seen how this proportion has gradually been increased. This is the reason why many entrepreneurs are eager to hire students with a good knowledge of business-related subjects, though they are often looking for those with a better level in English language. In fact, English is the language which often opens the door for graduate business students trying to face a good working future in this flourishing industry. It is obvious that knowing other languages is always considered as a positive asset (German and French being two fairly popular options), though it is English the language that any prospective businessman must know, as many trading exchanges are carried out in this language.

In order to fill possible vacancies, many human resources departments have traditionally observed the initial possibility of hiring Business Administration or Economics graduates. Unfortunately, most of them have not acquired a good knowledge of English throughout their high school years. The reason is crystal clear: most of them have just had 100 hours of English language in their university years, and their hypothetical advanced level in the language has not been achieved. Despite their basic knowledge of English grammar, many of them cannot use English in face-to-face situations, neither pick up a telephone in order to place or receive an order. Job interviews reveal that their actual business English competence is far from perfect, and many entrepreneurs have to devote time and money in order to organise in-company English classes.

Additionally, some employers have decided to focus on those students with a good knowledge of English (English Philology and English Translation graduates), assuming that their English language competence would be higher and then they might be able to become good trading professionals. However, interviews have detected that, as it could be easily assumed, these students lack the basic entrepreneurial skills that their business major counterparts do have. There is an obvious lack of instruction on professional skills in these language-based degrees, and companies have to fulfil these flaws throughout internal training.

Based on both problematic situations, a question arises: what can an entrepreneur do in order to find a good prospective worker?

THE ANSWER IS E.L.I.T.

The answer we have given to the Castellón industrial community is to design a Master's degree in order to increase the linguistic competence of Business-related graduates, as well as better prepare language-related majors to undertake selling tasks in the ceramics trade.

Our Master programme is called English Language for International Trade (E.L.I.T.) and aims to offer what the companies are looking for. Our students will face different modules, all established with the final purpose of getting the best from them in order to form good professionals for the Castellón industry.

In order to design the master's course, we decided to analyse the actual problems in detail. We visited a good number of firms in our area, interviewing Chief Executive Officers and Human Resources Directors. In some cases we used the help of some friends and colleagues working for those companies in order to arrange those meetings. In other situations (those when we did not know anybody working for the company we wanted to visit), we simply phoned and found some spare time to carry out this activity. In any case, we must thank all those executives we talked to, as their answers helped us to devise the final format of the E.L.I.T. programme. In these interviews we detected a basic concern for the need of English for business purposes. Traditionally, most companies want to recruit graduate students with a good competence in English language in order to either receive orders by phone or travel abroad as professional salesmen. This is, however, just a simplified view, and the overall interest for negotiating skills, presentation abilities or promotional language was also pointed

out in these interviews. Besides, this combination of businessrelated knowledge and English language competence was deemed as not being enough to get a good job by itself: students should undertake a period of supervised in-company practice in order to show how those things they have learned can be used in an authentic business environment. All these aspects forced us to carefully design the contents of the E.L.I.T. programme.

Once the general framework of this analysis had been established, we started working on the general layout of the programme. To do so we analysed different possibilities with the University authorities, and we finally came up with this 2-year programme.

- Year 1 / 1st semester.
Business English Communication Module
(100 teaching hours + tutorials and seminars)
- Year 1 / 2nd semester.
Business Management
(120 teaching hours + tutorials and seminars)
- Year 2 / 1st semester.
Business English Communication Module
(100 teaching hours + tutorials and seminars)
- Year 2 / 2nd semester.
Professional practice (a minimum of 120 hours of supervised practice in companies + a final dossier stating how all the contents of the master have been applied in this practice period)

It will be good to say that, after negotiating the programme with the university authorities, we decided to establish three different alternatives for the Business Management module. Students could choose between a general Business Management for the Ceramics Industry module, a fairly more specific module on Management for the e-business Company or, as an additional possibility, Business Management for the Tourism Industry, which is a growing sector in the area. All three possibilities have proved to be fairly popular among our students.

The two modules on Business English Communication were established, as commented above, following the indications of the companies in the Castellón area. We offered specific sub-modules on negotiations, promotional language, entertainment, business trips, presentations, telephoning, persuasion, meetings and every single activity that any business person will have to face in his/her prospective working future. Based on this detailed analysis of the actual necessities of the industry in our province, the programme was validated by our university's authorities. The programme was developed in the 2004-2005 course and it was finally offered to graduate students during the 2005-2006 academic year.

RESULTS AND PERSPECTIVES

So far the results can hardly be better. During this initial year twenty students decided to take part in the programme, whereas other seventeen have undertaken some of the separate modules offered. Thus, we are talking about thirty-seven students taking part in this innovative programme.

These results are quite positive, but we cannot be talking about complete success yet. We consider that the actual success of the programme could only be confirmed after achieving similar

enrolment results in following years, something that we are not totally sure of. Prospectives for the 2006-2007 academic year are good, but we still do not know the final results, so we consider that it is much better to be on the safe side. Let us simply state that we are working hard to find a way out for those needs that the Castellón industry confirmed in our initial interviews.

Additionally, we have been working on the analysis of different aspects which are basic for the better development of the students' linguistic competence in the company's environment. To cut a long story short, we can point out our project on the analysis of Annual Reports in NIFs (New International Firms) operating in the Valencian Community. 'Our aim is to offer some clues on how new companies can prepare their annual reports in different languages (English, Spanish and Valencian) in a successful way, paying attention to those fine nuances that can differentiate how these texts would be written in those languages. Similarly, and after observing all the problems that students often face in order to find a good job after completing their degrees, due to their lack of communicative competence in English, we have also developed a research project dealing with this matter.² We have started to analyse the problems which indicate the students' main flaws in order to find a good prospective job after finishing their university degrees and, based on those flaws and on the companies' needs, we will design teaching materials specially devised to overcome those problems.

As any reader will observe, adapting our teaching and researching efforts to the necessities of the industrial environment surrounding our University is not a simple task, but we have been working hard in order to succeed in it. Hopefully this effort will pay off in a few years' time and our firms will have the opportunity of hiring innovative professionals, ready to become key elements in the staff of the most important companies.

¹ This research project (La Memoria Anual como Elemento de Mejora en la Capacidad Comercial de la Joven Empresa Valenciana) has been funded by a grant from Generalitat Valenciana (GV05/116).

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